

Veterans

Those

who serve in our nation's uniform and under our flag deserve our respect, gratitude, and support. Before entering Congress, I worked as a clinical psychologist in veterans' hospitals and outpatient clinics, helping veterans recover from both the physical scars and the emotional wounds of combat. I was there to help vets and their families cope with lost limbs, brain injuries, lost vision and paralysis. And I have helped those who are struggling to return to "normal life" after going through experiences in war that no one would ever wish to endure.

Because of these experiences, I have always been a steadfast advocate for our veterans. Since the beginning of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, I have made regular visits to our hospitals and clinics to meet with soldiers and their families. I've led the fight to keep our local VA hospitals open, voted to strengthen the GI Bill, voted to end the Concurrent Receipt penalty on disabled vets and to give surviving spouses the benefits they deserve. I've also visited VFW and Legion halls throughout our district and am proud to have helped countless individual veterans receive the benefits they're entitled to or the medals they earned in service to our country.

If you are a veteran or know a vet or family member who needs help, please feel free to call my office at (360) 695-6292. My staff and I stand ready to help in any way we can.

Caring for Our Returning Service members and Their Families

At the end of 2006, more 600,000 veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other global hot spots, have been discharged. We must make sure the Veterans Administration has the resources it needs to treat their physical and emotional wounds and help them and their families readjust to home. Congressman Baird has repeatedly called on the Administration and Congress to make sure the Veterans Administration has the funding it needs.

In 2005, Congressman Baird led the fight to add an additional \$1.3 billion to the President's \$80 billion emergency supplemental appropriations request. While the Administration claimed the \$1.3 billion was unnecessary, the Veterans Administration asked for the

funding a few short months later. The Congressman's efforts to guarantee VA funding have been supported by key veterans' organizations, including the American Legion, Military Officers Association of America, National Military Family Association, and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Recently,

Congressman Baird supported linking veterans funding to military spending in Iraq and Afghanistan. He voted in favor of \$4.8 billion in additional service member and veteran health care as part of a military spending bill.

Congressman Baird has also supported legislation to improve the transition between military healthcare and veterans' healthcare. Congressman Baird voted in favor of the Veterans Outreach Improvement Act, which would enhance efforts to inform veterans about what benefits they are eligible for. He also supported the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act. This important legislation would assign case managers to our nation's wounded, simplify the different disability ratings systems in use by the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs, and ensure that records between the military and VA are transferred quickly and properly to ensure seamless care.

Making Sure Troops Get the Care and Training They Deserve

As a clinical psychologist who has worked extensively with Vietnam veterans, Congressman Baird knows the psychological trauma that can result from combat. As more soldiers return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, America must be prepared to help them cope with not only physical injuries, but also psychological wounds. To help our returning military personnel and veterans make a smooth transition to civilian life, Congressman Baird worked to pass an amendment that will help improve veterans' access to mental health services. The amendment requires the Secretary of Defense to launch a comprehensive review of the counseling and mental health services offered to U.S. soldiers and their families.

The Baird amendment will force the Department of Defense (DOD) to address how the decision to seek mental health treatment can impact a service member's career, and the extent to which the military's lack of firm confidentiality policies hamper treatment of soldiers and combat veterans. The amendment will also require DOD to examine disparities between the mental health services afforded the active duty military, and those available to members of the Reserve and National Guard. Finally, the amendment recognizes that many of our soldiers and their families live in rural areas and may not have ready access to the services they need.

Congressman Baird has also been a lead supporter of the Comprehensive Assistance for Veterans Exposed to Traumatic Stressors Act.

This bill would authorize further study to enhance our understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions, establish programs to identify and treat soldiers with

mental health conditions, and offer counseling to family members of injured or deceased combat soldiers. Congressman Baird also supports the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, which passed the House of Representatives. This legislation requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a comprehensive suicide prevention program for veterans.

Expanding Access to the Montgomery GI Bill

The Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) is one of the most successful, appreciated and well used programs offered by our government. Under the GI Bill, soldiers earn benefits and entitlements that later help defray the costs of college or vocational school education.

The Montgomery GI Bill's education benefits offer our returning soldiers an opportunity to learn new skills and better provide for their families. Many of our reservists in today's military serve the two years necessary to qualify for GI benefits, but not consecutively. By not serving consecutively, this generation of veterans gets caught in a loophole that prevents them from receiving education benefits. Congressman Baird has supported the Resuming Education After Defense Service Act to make soldiers who serve over two years of active duty after 9/11, even if that service is non-consecutive, eligible for education assistance offered by the GI Bill.

Congressman

Baird has also supported legislation to allow those who have served to transfer their education assistance benefits to their children. Many service members have a desire to give their children access to a good education, which this legislation will allow.

Concurrent Receipt

Congressman Baird voted to allow hundreds of thousands of military retirees to simultaneously collect their military retirement pay and Veterans Administration disability benefits. Prior to the passage of this law, military retirees were "taxed" a dollar of their retired pay for every dollar they received in VA disability compensation. Under one new law supported by Congressman Baird and passed by Congress, military retirees with service-connected disabilities rated 50% or more would see the "veterans' tax" phased out over ten years. More recently, Congressman Baird supported the successful effort to immediately phase out the "veterans' tax" for veterans with a 100% service-connected disability.

Although the reforms passed by Congress were a major step forward, they will only benefit veterans with a disability rated at 50 percent or higher. Existing law allows any federal civilian employee who is also a veteran with a service-connected disability to retire from his or her federal civilian job and receive both retired pay and disability compensation without penalty. It is wrong to treat military retirees

differently from federal civilian retirees, and Congressman Baird voted to abolish the veterans' tax entirely so that all military retirees, including those with a VA disability rated below 50 percent, would receive all the retirement and disability benefits they have earned.

Survivor Benefits

Currently, the benefits paid to the spouses of America's deceased veterans are reduced by 35 percent or more for survivors age 62 and older. This is just plain wrong. Surviving spouses of federal civilian employees receive 50 or 55 percent of retired pay for the rest of their life, with no reduction at any age, let alone the reduction to 35 percent of retired pay unjustly imposed on military widows.

That is why Congressman Baird voted for a bill that would put a permanent end to the "military widows' tax." This important legislation would phase out this unfair reduction over 3 and a half years and offer participating retirees an opportunity to enroll in the plan.

Protecting the Vancouver VA Medical Center

In July of 2003, the Veterans Administration (VA) announced it was considering closing major portions of important health care facilities in Vancouver and Walla Walla. The Vancouver VA provides invaluable medical services to thousands of Washington state veterans, and its closure would have dealt a severe blow to veterans throughout Southwest Washington.

Congressman Baird quickly rallied to block the closure and on August 4, 2003 joined more than 400 local veterans on the campus of the Vancouver VA to protest the Bush Administration's proposal. The following month, Congressman Baird testified before the VA-appointed Capital Asset and Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission, highlighting the need for this facility.

In his testimony, Baird made clear the devastating impact that closing the medical center would have on the thousands of veterans who rely on its services. Speaking on behalf of the veterans that had packed the hearing room to express their opposition to the VA's closure, Congressman Baird told the assembled Commissioners that, "The detrimental impact the closure of the Vancouver VA would have on local veterans in need of acute rehabilitative treatment is something this Commission can not deny nor in good conscience, ignore...the closure of the Vancouver VA would be a grave mistake that would reverberate through the veterans of my community long after you Commissioners have gone."

When the CARES Commission issued its final report in February of 2004, the Commission strongly recommended preserving the Vancouver VA and

expand services offered at the facility.

Department
of Veterans Affairs

Northwest
Network

CARES
Commission

House
Committee on Veterans Affairs

Senate
Committee on Veterans Affairs